12: Douglas T-3 (1951)1953 AJ4 W. Tibetans AJ4

CHAPTER 18

HOW MANY HUSBANDS DO YOU HAVE?

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Polyandry is a form of polygamy. But instead of the husband having several wives, the wife has several husbands. Ladakh is not the only place in the world where polyandric marriages have existed. But it is one of the few places where they still thrive. They thrive there despite the fact that Kashmir has outlawed them.

595 Some say polyandry exists where there is a scarcity of women;
• 182 that when there are not enough women to go around, a social-religious institution is created enabling one woman, with propriety, to do double or treble or quadruple service. That was probably the origin of polyandry in the plains of India where long ago there were in places a scarcity of women owing to female infanticide. Others say that polyandry was introduced into Ladakh and Tibet to take care of the special needs of family life there. The man of the house customarily spends more than half the year away from home with caravans, or with sheep and goats, or on pilgrimages. There is the need to protect the women and

12: Douglas T-3 (1951)1953 AJ4 W. Tibetans AJ4

the children during his long absences and to maintain a standard of connubial fidelity. So the wife is given protection and companionship of extra husbands. Teddy Roosevelt, Jr., who passed through Ladakh about thirty years ago on a hunting expedition, reported in his book, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, that polyandry served greatly to ameliorate the lot of the woman in this region. I found no evidence of that. The woman in Ladakh is the work horse of the family. When she marries she takes up the great burden of children, the house, and the fields. Unmarried women are spry, pretty, and gay. Married women are old by thirty. A few years of married life makes them bent and silent and wan. Polyandry, if designed to cater to the woman, has failed in its purpose.

In some regions polyandry may have been designed to cut down the number of babies. The scarcity of food is thought by some to have been the reason for the introduction long ago of the polyandric marriage into a few remote sections of the Kulu Valley. A related reason is sometimes advanced for the introduction of polyandry into Tibet and Ladakh. The view is that it was imported by the lamas as an instrument of control. This region does not produce much food. If the population curve were to go up, there would not be enough food to go around. Population is held in check by reducing the number of wives. That means more food for everyone as fewer babies are born. That means that the monasteries, bulging with food, need not fear a growing discontent among the masses who starve so that the lamas may eat. The purpose, if such it was, is lost in history. But the effect of polyandry is plain. The population of Ladakh has long remained practically stationary; and the food supply of the lamas has in no way been threatened.

Another theory behind polyandry also traces to a purpose that serves the interest of the monasteries. The idea is that if a woman has several husbands there will likely be discontent and rivalry among the men. The wife will have favorites; and there will be

595 some husbands who will not share fully in the connubial bliss.
• 182 They will be apt to turn their backs on marriage and retire to the
792 monasteries to become lamas.

595 All of these reasons† may contribute to the invention and spread
428 of polyandry in Ladakh and Tibet. But the chief reason is the law of primogeniture. In this region the land, on the death of the father, passes to the eldest son. That has the advantage of keeping an estate intact, of preventing it from being pulverized into many pieces. Otherwise, family units might become so small as to be
[735] uneconomic. Proponents of primogeniture say that if the estates were pulverized, starvation would be the fate of those who, even with large farms, barely keep at the subsistence level.

But if all the land goes to the eldest son, the younger ones are cast out and nothing is left for them. New land in this bleak and barren country is not readily had. There are no frontiers where untapped, fertile land can be opened to settlement. And there will be none unless vast irrigation projects are undertaken. There is no industry to which the younger sons can turn. There are precious few trades that will absorb them. The economy is almost exclusively agricultural. The younger sons must look to the land for their livelihood unless perchance they become lamas, or try to develop caravan routes, or leave the country completely.

The problem, therefore, was to keep all the sons on the ancestral plot of ground and yet preserve the old home place as a unit. If each son moved in with a wife, there would probably be trouble. Even if there were no trouble, there would be many babies and an increasing number of mouths to feed.

595 And so several reasons may have combined to build each generation of sons around one wife. This woman, who became the wife of the eldest son, became the wife of each of his brothers. The first-born son—whatever husband be the father—became the
[601] heir. The eldest husband is called Father; each of his brothers is called Little Father. In the eyes of the law, each has equal access to the wife and she has equal obligations to all the brothers. In

† [See p.179 -- ANALYST]

12: Douglas T-3 (1951)1953 AJ4 W. Tibetans AJ4

practice she may reject the husbandly advances of any of the husbands or she may demand the husbandly attentions of all of them. 595

But the polyandric system in Ladakh is not a pure and unadulterated one. It bows to expediency. In theory, there is only one wife. Often there are two or perhaps three in a family. The first wife may be sickly. Or she may be so busy bearing children that she cannot work in the fields. Or the burden of the children, the house, and the fields may be too great for any one woman. And so another woman is brought in as wife; and the bedroom acquires a communistic cast. 595 178

At times there will be no son to inherit the land. In that event the eldest daughter takes all. Yet, if she has sisters, they too must be provided for. And so the institution of the *magpa* was invented. The father who has no male heir looks around for a likely son-in-law. When the father finds a suitable candidate, he makes a proposition to him. If the chap will give up his family name and take the family name of the other family, he can marry the eldest daughter and their son will inherit the property. If this chap marries the eldest daughter, he automatically becomes the husband of all of her sisters. He becomes the *magpa*, the new head of the sonless family. And so when Mr. Gyalang marries Miss Dombos, he becomes Mr. Dombos. 595 428

Thus primogeniture in Ladakh and in Tibet has produced both polyandry and polygamy. These institutions today have a great hold on the people. The Kashmir government is not proud of them. The educated people look down on them. The best families in Leh do not like to discuss the problem. But the roots of polyandry are deep; they are tied to the economy as well as to the customs of the people. And behind the scenes the lamas give the system spiritual and moral support. For the institution of primogeniture has long been thought to be sound in a land where the margin between subsistence and starvation is so narrow. And polyandry is sound by the standards of the lamas, who measure 595 428 182

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428 the welfare of the state by the security and well-being of their
• 182 religious order.

595 The marriage of a woman to plural husbands, like the marriage
585 of a *magpa* to plural wives or the marriage of one man to one woman, is a simple affair in Ladakh. The relatives escort the bride to the groom's house, where prayers are read by a lama. The prayers are in part directed toward a separation of the gods of the bride's house from the gods of the groom's house. We of the West are not, in some respects, as wise as those of the East. But we do know that when the house of the bride is too closely associated with the house of the groom, trouble may ensue. We have our own terminology for the problem. The Ladakhis may be more realistic than we. They tackle the problem vigorously, though perhaps indirectly, by having the lamas exorcise the spirits of the house of the bride and keep them from the house of the groom. They know, as well as we do, that house gods can be troublesome. What the lama does is this. He has a vase in which he puts various charms. Then, after pronouncing incantations over the vase, he breaks it and thus destroys the entrance of the bride's house gods into the house of the groom.

The marriage ceremony is simple. It is merely a declaration by the lama that the couple are man and wife. Several days of entertainment follow, with the lamas reciting prayers every morning.

595 Divorce is even more simple. The wife in a polyandric marriage
586 or the *magpa* in a polygamous marriage gets a divorce merely by walking out. If the brothers want to get rid of their joint wife, the procedure is almost as simple. They merely tell her to go hence and, as damages, present her with a cow. But they must be unanimous to make the divorce that easy. If one brother wants her to stay, she need not go. If sisters decide their *magpa* is a poor bargain, they can dismiss him and present him with a horse in lieu of damages.

The wife of a polyandric marriage can get her divorce by getting up and walking out at any time. The husbands may send a

K 131 595 596 428 591 Tiva Polyandry. The Tiyas, living in Malabar, exhibit one especially interesting phenomenon: they are a polyandrous people who are patrilocal (that is, the woman marries and goes to live with her husbands), but also matrilineal (that is, the property that they have—and they do not have much, because they are common laborers—is inherited from the mother's brothers). Unfortunately, I did not have much time to investigate these people because the war broke out when I had only been at work among them for three weeks. Thus, the only thing I could note was that they are polyandrous, patrilocal, and matrilineal at the same time. I should like to return and see how this works out.

Ti 123 To 123 K 123 *General Conclusions.* I am afraid that some of these results may seem superficial. I was unable to stay as long as I should have liked among all these peoples. I did not know any of their languages well, and to really do good field work, one would have to live among them and not put questions to them as I did. However, I hope to return and to do a more thorough study.

Ti 155 To 155 K 155 As far as the psychoanalytical results are concerned, I think that they are highly illuminating, though not sufficiently ample to be conclusive. There are strong indications that, broadly speaking, psychic mechanisms, libidinal development and mental structure may be identical to those in the West. There are, thus, numerous instances of trends pointing to Oedipus and castration complexes. What I, however, really investigated insufficiently was where we should place the relative borderline between what is specifically culturally determined in psychology (such as traits due to family environment) and what is generally humanly so (such as sociobiological traits).

K 595 182 To 595 182 Ti 595 182 As far as the ethnological results are concerned, these can be examined from two different angles. Functionally, polyandry fulfils the same purpose as all other marriages: it is a social institution for the satisfaction of the individual sexual in-

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stinct and for the orderly social procreation of offspring. Formally, it is more difficult to say why this institution has taken on this curious appearance. As far as I know, authors so far have been rather at a loss to furnish a satisfactory explanation. Many, of course, have been given, with a great amount of variety in their choice.

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For instance, we are given historical explanations. In India they say people have been polyandrous for many centuries; that there are indications, such as archaeological (about the Heftalite Huns, 6th c. A.D.) and literary (the Indian epic poem, the Mahabarata), that the people in this area, both Aryan and non-Aryan, were polyandrous in antiquity. Economic reasons for this have been given; *i.e.*, that the country is poor, that nomadism among Todas or Tibetans, in earlier times, perhaps led to a polyandrous society in order to limit the number of children. Then, demographical explanations have been given, that there is an excess of males over females in this society, and that they have to be polyandrous for that reason. For instance, the Todas practise female infanticide and this is given as a reason for their polyandry. Their men drink a lot of milk, and some people say that the fact that they have more proteins in their diet in this fashion produces more male offspring than female. I do not pretend to know how far this biological explanation is true. Sociological reasons have also been given, namely, that the men travel and have to leave one brother at home with the wife (a reason which I hinted at earlier). In east and south India, the people known as the Nayars, who once could also be called polyandrous, had a very definite military organization (somewhat like that of the Sikhs in the north), and that has been given as a reason why a people is polyandrous: one brother can always remain at home with the wife while the other is away serving with the colors.

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It seems to me that these explanations are not sufficient. As far as the historical

To 829 595 121 182 Ti 829 595 121 182 K [121] would give the following interpretation of the polyandrous systems found: It seems to me that polyandry is "not necessarily a primitive institutional form of marriage, but that it is due to the psychological reaction of individuals living in communities subject to environmentally poor and insecure economic conditions, persisting, in the case of the Tibetans, through isolation from other communities, or, in the case of the Todas, as a type of defense mechanism against invasion by other cultures." I have not included the Tiyas in this definition because I do not know them sufficiently and would like to go more thoroughly into their polyandry before giving an interpretation of it.

Ti 595 114 212 Now, if I take this definition, instance by instance, I shall be able to interpret exactly what I mean by it. When I first say that polyandry is "not necessarily a primitive institutional form of marriage," I mean that, for instance, the Tibetans are all literate and educated people, with whom you can speak quite freely, who have a very pronounced sense of reality and do not in any way seem like a primitive people. It thus looks as if polyandry were a system entirely outside of the usual evolutionary stages of marriage, in which anthropology puts the matriarchal before the patriarchal system.

To 595 114 [182] [593] Ti 595 114 [182] [593] Next, I say that polyandry is "due to the psychological reaction of individuals living in communities subject to environmentally poor and economically insecure conditions," by which I mean, living in a physical environment which leads to a miserable economy. This economy makes them very interdependent, within each family, upon the help of each other, and this interdependence, in turn, which is stressed very highly in these families because of the necessity of sticking together under the difficult physical conditions, calls for less aggression among the members of the family itself and among groups of them. It seems to me that this stress on the condemnation of aggression is such that even something approaching incest

24:Peter E-5 (1938)1963 AJ4 West Tibetans AJ4
Lahul

made clear to me exactly what was meant by this name (on the 25th June, 1938).

Lahulis, the Moravian missionary told me, are very keen not to divide up their property and anxious, also, not to let their family name die out. In order to attain these two objectives, they practise polyandry and both patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance, the latter type, however, only in the case of there being no male heir, so that a generation in which there are only girls may be bridged over.

He compared the Lahuli household to a pivot around which all the interests of the family revolved. Polyandry was practised because in this way a number of brothers living on a family property could keep it undivided by taking one wife in common and sharing her, the land and the children between themselves. Usually inheritance was patrilineal, boys inheriting jointly and without division from their fathers, and then marrying polyandrously as the latter had done, and so on and so on through the future generations.

Matrilineal succession was resorted to when there was no male heir or heirs. In that case, if there were more than one girl, the eldest became the heiress, while the others were married off into other families, usually polyandrously, to brothers. In the case of one female heir, she, like the eldest of many daughters, inherited the whole property from her parents, undivided, and then was free to take as many husbands as she wished with whom to procreate offspring for the household. If she had boys, they inherited as described above; if she in turn only had girls, the same procedure as that which had been followed in her own case was again made use of.

The first type of marriage, the Reverend Peter said, that in which the sons of a Lahuli family took one wife in common, was the most widespread and was called a *bag-ma* marriage (*Bag-ma*, meaning "bride" in Tibetan). It was patrilocal and patrilineal. The other type of marriage, the one in which a daughter inherited all the property alone and took as many husbands as she wished, was more exceptional. Its name was a *mag-pa* marriage (from *Mag-pa*, "son in law" or "bridegroom" in Tibetan), an appellation by which the woman's husband or husbands were also known in that case (see genealogy of the Karpa family in which this term is used).

My informant told me that in Leh, Ladak, he had known a woman with three *mag-pas*, all unrelated, so that this is a form of non-fraternal polyandry. He said that the younger brothers of a *mag-pa* do not have access to his wife, as it is he who has married into her household and

24:Peter E-5 (1938)1963 AJ4 West Tibetans AJ4
Lahul

595 [851] [842] although sometimes he is known. It was true, the Thakur said, that when a family had no issue, a man from outside was called in in an attempt to sire a child for them. Such a man was called a *p'horjag* (*P'horJag*) as in other parts of the Himalayas and in Tibet where the custom was also followed. It was not particularly well looked upon in Lahul, and was only rarely resorted to. Monogamous families seemed to favour it more than polyandrous ones, he added.

595 855 The care and upbringing of the children were also a joint concern, I was told. It could not be said that any one parent, be it one of the fathers or the mother, had a more important role to play in this respect [854] than the others. But of course, when children were very young, the mother looked after them more than the fathers. Later on, it was perhaps the brother with the greatest personality who played a prominent part in the education of the children. On the whole, however, the men seemed afraid of their sons, believing that if they treated them badly, they themselves might suffer for it later on in life.

595 428 [626] Young people often revolted against polyandry, but experience showed that it was nevertheless still the best policy to follow. Fathers put pressure on their boys, when they rose in rebellion against the idea of sharing a wife, by threatening to withold handing down the family property to them. This was generally quite sufficient to make the young men change their minds.

595 [598] [187] In conclusion, summing up his views on polyandry, Thakur Partap Chand said that the system worked pretty smoothly on the whole. There was little quarrelling and not much jealousy. The reason for which this matrimonial custom was practised was an economic one: the soil was poor, the holdings small, and there was little possibility of acquiring other arable land. Each family had to hang on to what it owned; partition was strenuously avoided.

601 I obtained a few kinship terms from the informant, but not as many as I was able to gather, later, in other areas of Tibetan culture. Those I obtained in Lahul, however, are of interest from a comparative point of view, because they are more archaic linguistically than those now in use in Tibet proper and show a persistance of old forms in these remote western valleys. Grandfather (both father's and mother's father) is *meme* (*Mes-mes*) in Lahul; grand uncles (paternal and maternal grandfather's brothers), *lamas* (*bLama*), and any old men are also called by this appellation. Grandmother (mother's and father's mother) is *api* (*Ap'hyi*), as are also maternal and paternal grand aunts, nuns, known as *chomos* (*Jo-mo*), and other old women.

24:Peter E-5 (1938)1963 AJ4 West Tibetans AJ4
Ladak

He asked me how it was that we were so wealthy in Europe without being polyandrous. It seemed to him incomprehensible that one could stay rich while dividing up the family property with each monogamous marriage, as we do in our countries. It would be impossible to do this in Ladak, he said, because there would never be enough to go round, and everybody would quickly be reduced to famine.

595 425 428 [182]

I must say that Lobsang Tok-Tok's question took me by surprise. In those days I had given no thought to this problem and it had never occurred to me yet that this might appear extraordinary to people living in polyandry. So I said that, now that I came to think of it, it was no doubt true that things were not the same with us. When we married, I said, each of us goes off with his wife and tries to fend for himself and build up a family life based on his own earnings. Of course, it meant tapping new sources of production, but then we did move away and were continually starting new enterprises in new places in order to be able to live.

Lobsang agreed that it would not be possible to do otherwise if one did not live in polyandry on the same piece of land, in the same household, generation after generation, without dividing it up. He had noticed, he said, that those Ladakis who were converts to Mohammedanism did the same as we did; they ceased, overnight, to be polyandrous, and divided up the property immeliately they got married. The result was that there was not enough to go round for all of them. The eldest brother remained on the best part of the land, and the others had to move away. They had to look for work, often as landless labourers, which was most depressing. He had noticed, too, that some of them even went further afield, and travelled all the way to Burma to work in the ruby mines there. Obviously, he concluded, they did so just as Europeans had to do, because they were monogamous, and even, in some cases, polygamous (polygynous).

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Lobsang Tok-Tok was silent for a little while after this long discourse (which Nono Tse-P'hün translated for me) and I sat cross-legged opposite him, a cup of tea in my hand, looking at his heavy, mongoloid frame and face (upon which some hair did, nevertheless, grow), and wondering who was doing the field-work, he or I. Then he said something again to my interpreter and shortly afterwards I heard in English what it was that he had said. It was that he could now grasp why Europeans had colonies throughout the world, why they came to India and even to Ladak. It was obviously because, with the family system that they had, they did not have enough to live on at home, and the fact that they did not practise polyandry led them to go overseas to seek

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24:Peter E-5 (1938)1963 AJ4 West Tibetans AJ4
Ladak

595 123 182 a livelihood – like the Moslem Ladakis who went to Burma. I was, I confess, considerably impressed by the old man's perspicacity. It was also a lesson to me, and showed me better than anything else what circumstances were like in this area of Tibetan culture, and how polyandry was connected, or appeared to be, with the economic necessities of the environment.

595 601 That same afternoon, we went on to visit another polyandrous family living in a neighbouring house. Here, an elderly father, remarried to a new wife after his first wife had died, lived in a *k'hang-gu* situated on the family grounds, very close to the ancestral house, the *k'hang-chen*. In the latter, his son by the deceased wife, now lived with his wife and [115] five of six children that the couple had had. This son was our informant, and apart from the polyandry in which the sons lived, I was [888] interested to see how grandparents and parents resided separately. Their [591] genealogy is to be found in Table 28.

591 595 888 Lobsang Namgyal's eldest daughter was married off in *bag-ma* to the eldest son of the Tsana household. His three sons were still very young (the eldest only just eighteen) but were already married polyandrously to Skalzang Deskid. She had no children yet, and I was told that they were waiting for her to have her first baby to put Lobsang Namgyal and his wife, Tsering Rolma, into a second *k'hang-gu*. This is sometimes done in Ladak, instead of taking over from the parents directly after the wedding; it is as if the newly-married had no reason yet to become the official owners of the family property. The two younger daughters, still very small, would move into the new *k'hang-gu* with their parents, I was told, and would remain there until they were married out in *bag-ma*. Asked where the "small house" was into which father and mother would eventually move, I was informed that they would take the place of Tsang Dön-drup and his wife, Tsang Rolma. These two would then go to another *k'hang-gu* situated on another piece of ancestral land, and in which grandparents always resided in the Tsang-bi family. It was quite apparent that the different portions reserved for retiring elders were always the same, awaiting new occupants which the inexorable march of time brought to them.

595 601 888 591 On the following day, August 31st 1938, Nono Tse-P'hün took me to more polyandrous households of Leh. First, we visited a family called *Od-ldan* (*aOd-lDan*) in which an heiress had married in *mag-pa*, and lived in the *k'hang-gu* while her three boys, living in polyandry, occupied the *k'hang-chen*. Their genealogy as I made it that day, is given in Table 29.

*[i.e., Lobsang Namgyal -- Analyst]